

Operators say international travelers, particularly first-time visitors unfamiliar with Uganda's geography or health systems, are reacting cautiously to Ebola-related headlines.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

Just as Uganda's tourism industry appeared to be regaining momentum after the devastation of Covid-19, a new combination of pressures is beginning to test the sector again. Renewed Ebola fears are unsettling travellers and triggering cancellations, while rising fuel prices are driving up the cost of air travel, safari logistics, accommodation, and domestic tourism.

For tour operators, hotel owners, and events organisers, the concern is not simply about isolated disruptions. It is the fear that Uganda's tourism recovery, still fragile after years of pandemic-related losses, could once again lose momentum under the weight of both a health scare and an increasingly expensive operating environment brought on by US President Donald Trump's war in the Middle East.

"We are monitoring the situation closely and with the seriousness it deserves," says Francis Nyende, the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) marketing manager.

"Any health alert of this magnitude, particularly one declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the WHO [World Health Organisation], has the potential to influence traveller perception, and we are not in the business of downplaying that reality."

Tourism remains one of the most shock-sensitive sectors in any economy because it depends almost entirely on confidence, movement, and disposable income. Unlike essential spending such as food or healthcare, travel is often among the first expenses households and tourists cut back on whenever uncertainty or costs rise. That vulnerability is now becoming visible across Uganda's tourism value chain.

Fear travels faster than facts

Even before governments impose travel restrictions, disease outbreaks often begin affecting tourism through perception alone. Operators say international travellers, particularly first-time visitors unfamiliar with Uganda's geography or health systems, are reacting cautiously to Ebola-related headlines, regardless of how limited the actual outbreak may be.

Patra Agassa of Express Safaris says the impact is already translating into lost business.

"Just recently, we had a client cancel a 10-day itinerary out of fear of Ebola, despite being fully prepared to visit Uganda," she says.

"The reality is that convincing a client to travel during these periods is an uphill battle. You either have to provide official documentation from the Ministry of Health proving that cases are low and contained, or watch them take their business to neighbouring countries like Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania."

For many operators, the bigger frustration is not only the outbreak itself,

Ebola fears, fuel prices pile pressure on tourism sector



Tourists at Murchison Falls National Park in Uganda. PHOTO/ FILE

but how quickly international perception shifts once Uganda's name becomes associated with Ebola.

"I appeal to the government and communication officials to be incredibly mindful of how they broadcast such alerts," Ms Agassa further opines. "A single, poorly framed announcement can destroy months of marketing effort and investment in minutes. Tourism benefits all of us, and public communication must protect the industry while keeping people safe."

Ms Kedith Kanyesigye, a tour consultant at Safari with Eddis, says the slowdown in enquiries has already become noticeable.

"We are already experiencing cancellations from clients who had confirmed travel for June and July," she said. "We have also lost business deals that were close to being finalised because many agents and travellers became worried and decided not to continue. We are now receiving very few inquiries, which shows how much confidence in travel to Uganda has dropped."

Ms Kanyesigye says Uganda's tourism industry remains trapped in a cycle where every new crisis interrupts recovery before stability fully returns.

"We keep falling every time there is progress in recovery, and yet each setback makes rebuilding even harder for the industry," she said. "The global headlines are louder than the positive information coming from Uganda, and this has greatly affected trust in travel to the country."

The concern among tourism players is that foreign tourists often do not distinguish between isolated outbreaks and widespread national risk, especially when international media coverage amplifies fear.

Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) officials insist the situation remains under control and argue that Uganda's health re-

sponse systems are far stronger today than during previous outbreaks.

"We want to be clear and factual: Uganda is not an Ebola epicentre," Nyende said. "The confirmed cases in Uganda are imported and linked to travel from the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo], and our Ministry of Health, working with WHO and other partners, has responded swiftly and transparently. Uganda has successfully managed Ebola scares before, and our health response infrastructure has matured significantly."

Still, even UTB acknowledges that perception remains one of tourism's biggest vulnerabilities.

"Some operators have reported increased traveller enquiries seeking reassurance before confirming bookings, and a number of prospective visitors are in a 'wait and see' mode," Nyende says. "We have also received isolated reports of cancellations, particularly from first-time visitors who may be less familiar with Uganda's geography relative to the DRC."

Fuel price squeeze

At the same time, rising fuel prices are increasing pressure across the tourism economy. Fuel costs influence almost every stage of tourism operations, from airfare pricing and safari transport to hotel logistics, food supplies, and elec-

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tricity generation.

For airlines, jet fuel remains one of the biggest operational expenses, meaning rising global oil prices often translate directly into higher ticket prices. That creates another challenge for Uganda, whose tourism sector already competes against better-connected and sometimes cheaper regional destinations such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

Marvin Kiyaga of Pearl Afric Tours and Travel says operators are now being forced to rework pricing structures that had been agreed months earlier.

"Rising fuel prices in the world and Uganda in particular have greatly caused financial strain to tour operators and how safari logistics run," he says. "A litre of fuel, which used to be at Shs4,500 is currently at Shs6,200, an increase of about 50 percent from the original price we used to quote for packages already sold to guests."

Mr Kiyaga says the cost increases are now affecting transport, accommodation, and overall package pricing, making Uganda less attractive to budget-conscious travellers.

"At the same time, the Ebola situation and poor management of information have caused a big threat and significantly dampened Uganda's upcoming tourism season despite containment efforts," he adds.

For operators already operating on thin margins after Covid-19, the combined impact is becoming increasingly difficult to absorb.

"For tour operators, this combination means tighter margins, unpredictable client flows, and the need to reassure guests that Uganda remains a safe destination," Mr Kiyaga adds.

Domestic tourism under strain

The pressure is not limited to international travel. Domestic tourism, which became a lifeline for many hotels and

tour operators during and after Covid-19, is also beginning to slow under the weight of rising pump prices and broader inflationary pressures. Families are cutting back on leisure travel, shortening trips, or postponing holidays altogether as transport costs rise.

Peter Sebulime, alias Demo Riley, president of the National Tourism Events Organisers Federation, says the events industry is already seeing weaker turnout and declining ticket sales.

"Our events industry is built around people and gatherings, but the Ebola outbreak is hurting business as authorities continue to warn against public events," he says. "Today, as I speak, events are underperforming, and ticket sales have dropped as rising fuel prices continue to strain the economy."

He points to the postponement of the 11th edition of the Alur Cultural Festival after Zombo District was declared an Ebola red zone.

"A member of our federation was forced to postpone the festival after a year of planning and investment," Mr Sebulime says.

The concern for industry players is that Uganda's tourism sector supports thousands of livelihoods beyond hotels and tour companies alone, including transport workers, food suppliers, entertainers, craft sellers, and conservation activities. Any prolonged slowdown, therefore, carries wider economic consequences.

Govt betting on communication

Government officials insist Uganda can avoid another tourism collapse if communication is handled carefully and consistently. During the opening of the Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo (POATE) 2026 in Mubonyo last week, President Museveni sought to calm anxiety around the outbreak.

"I really saw that many people were panicking," Mr Museveni said. "Ebola spreads through intimate contact, and an infected person only develops visible signs after several days."

The President defended the government's decision against sweeping border closures.

"When we met with the task force, we did not agree with closing borders completely," he said. "We shall continue working, no cause for alarm."

UTB says its strategy now focuses heavily on coordinated messaging between the Ministry of Health, the Uganda Media Centre, and tourism stakeholders.

"The narrative must be unambiguous," Mr Nyende says, adding, "Uganda's key tourism zones like Bwindi, Queen Elizabeth, Murchison Falls, and the Ssese Islands are safe, open, and fully operational. We will not allow misinformation or geographical conflation with the DRC to go unanswered."

Mr Nyende argues that the successful hosting of POATE itself was intended to send a message of confidence.

"That event was itself a powerful statement, that Uganda did not flinch, that our sector continued to do business, and that we convened an international tourism platform in the middle of a health alert with full confidence," he says. "Our message to the world is simple: come informed, not afraid. Uganda is open."

But for many operators on the ground, reassurance alone may not be enough. The deeper concern is that Uganda's tourism industry is once again being reminded how vulnerable recovery remains to shocks beyond its control. And after years of rebuilding from Covid-19, many fear the sector simply has less room left for another setback.